

## Information Is Style

### Cool Is a Style of Information

Cool style must figure in any discussion of cool content. If information cool is a form of “deco-technology,” as I have suggested, then another way to say that its content is useless is to identify “uselessness” with the conversion of all the workaday techniques, procedures, routines, protocols, and standards of information into an experience of pure style, which in the producer culture of knowledge work is translated as “design” (a style one either produces or can imagine “prosumeristically” producing, not a style one just consumes). After all, even “no design” in the workstyle or lifestyle of knowledge work would still contain enough minimal design—that of the underlying GUI interface—to allow cool pages to be flaunted in ways that exceed the strict bounds of rational content. (Witness the *Ode to Lynx* page that wittily celebrates the bare-bones functionality of the old, text-only Lynx browser by using the GUI to display a graphical screenshot of Lynx.) And “no design” is the rare exception rather than the norm for cool pages, some of which are designed to within an inch of their lives.

In short, formalism—as I have foreshadowed by invoking the New Critics on paradox and the Russian Formalists on defamiliarization—is a necessary approach to information cool. Formalism, above all other twentieth-century artistic and critical movements, suborned the technological rationality of

modernity by remolding its functionalist assumptions so profoundly as to imprint them with the distinctive style of "modernism." That imprint came from inscribing the idea of form so deeply into function that it could no longer be discarded like packaging from the product.<sup>1</sup> Form instead became the new belief system called design. It will be helpful, therefore, to put on formalist spectacles for a time to see how contemporary, postindustrial cool on the Web descends with variation from the modernist, industrial era fusion of form and content that the New Critics (as if foreseeing the GUI interface) called "iconic." What is the formal design of information cool?

A first answer will arrive if we simply line up information cool over modernist formalism as if tracing a pattern on a transparency. Formalism of the early to mid-twentieth century revolved around the conviction that while good form required unity, such totality could no longer be crafted on the models of classical symmetry or Romantic organicism—that is, by subordinating or internalizing variations in form. Rather, good form required the exposure of the variations and counter-pressures, even the stark contradictions, that composed it, and in a manner that was not just decorative or historicist (Victorian, some modernists called it) but aggressively functional, like the strutwork of a steel bridge. In the realm of literary criticism, for example, the New Critics argued that good poetry sustains its "unity," "balance," and "harmony" not despite but through "tension," "ambiguity," "irony," and "paradox." And the Russian Formalists similarly argued that good literature unifies ("motivates") all its motifs but also requires elements that "roughen," "make more difficult," or strike atonally against too "automatic" a uniformity.<sup>2</sup>

In our present context the most relevant formalisms are neither literary nor intellectual but graphical and commercial. I refer to the modernist graphic design movements that followed up on the avant-garde experiments of futurism and dadaism (studied by Johanna Drucker in *The Visible Word*) by professionalizing the design trade and welding it to state or corporate industry: first Russian constructivism and the Dutch De Stijl movement in the 1910s and 1920s, then Bauhaus and the affiliated New Typography of the 1920s and 1930s, and finally—after the great exodus of Middle European designers during World War II (especially to the United States)—the generalized Swiss or International Style that dominated business advertising and "corporate identity" campaigns in the 1950s through at least the 1970s or 1980s.

Prompted by political, artistic, and technological changes, this modernist genealogy broke with nineteenth-century graphic styles that, in its view, had



Figure 6.1 Printer's proof for a poster, 1888

From Philip B. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992), p. 138, fig. 10-16. Text copyright © 1992 by Philip B. Meggs. This material is used by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

composed variation and unity as if on two separate tracks. Variation in the nineteenth century had been accented through busy ornaments, rules, serif typefaces, type sizes, illustrations, and so on, marking out unrelated “zones of activity” on the page.<sup>1</sup> Unity, meanwhile, had been enforced by arranging all elements symmetrically around the central vertical axis, which thus functioned as an externally imposed schema independent of any particular activity on the page (see figure 6.1). To modernist eyes, it appeared that there was no overall synthesis of design in Victorian graphic style—no single perspective (and, not incidentally, no self-aware profession of designers) charged with overseeing the total form of the composition. The fundamental reason was that the one principle necessary to integrate variation with unity was missing. That principle, articulated most famously in Louis Sullivan’s dictum that “form follows function,” was that both variation and unity must be motivated by a common governor of design internal to each page, poster, leaflet, or other formal frame: content. Only the functional relation of form to content could rationalize the bolding, upper-casing, or placement of a word *here* as opposed to *there* while keeping sight of the need to coordinate effects around a single, desired impact beyond the imagination of Victorian axial symmetry (see figure 6.2). In the final analysis, earlier typographers were not truly designers because they did not design *meaning*.

By contrast, modernist graphic design focused above all on totality of design (*gestalt*, in German). Or, rather, the idea was to look at every page, poster, or leaflet as a whole in which variation and unity were so tightly, if tensely, bound that their very nature—and so the totality of design they constituted—altered. “Variation” became the great modernist design principles of asymmetry, contrast, and tension. Everything depended on edgily unbalanced, striking elements that danced dialectically with their opposites to suggest a merely implicit, dynamic totality. Asymmetry itself came to express the new, modernist sense of symmetry (figs. 6.3, 6.4, 6.5).<sup>4</sup> Reciprocally, unity was no longer central axial balance but what might be called antithetical balance: the perception of individually off-center elements whose very clash of “large/small, light/dark, horizontal/vertical, square/round, smooth/rough, closed/open, coloured/plain” (to use the terms of Jan Tschichold’s *New Typography*) marked the negative image of the center—the invisible center *not* there. There could be no symmetry except as instantiated in asymmetry.<sup>5</sup> In practice, therefore, modernist graphic design did not only favor asymmetrical arrangements, slashing diagonals, contrasting primary colors, assertive white space used to set off elements, and wildly disproportionate type. It also subscribed to the so-called “grid system” of unified geometrical arrangement in which invisible (though sometimes

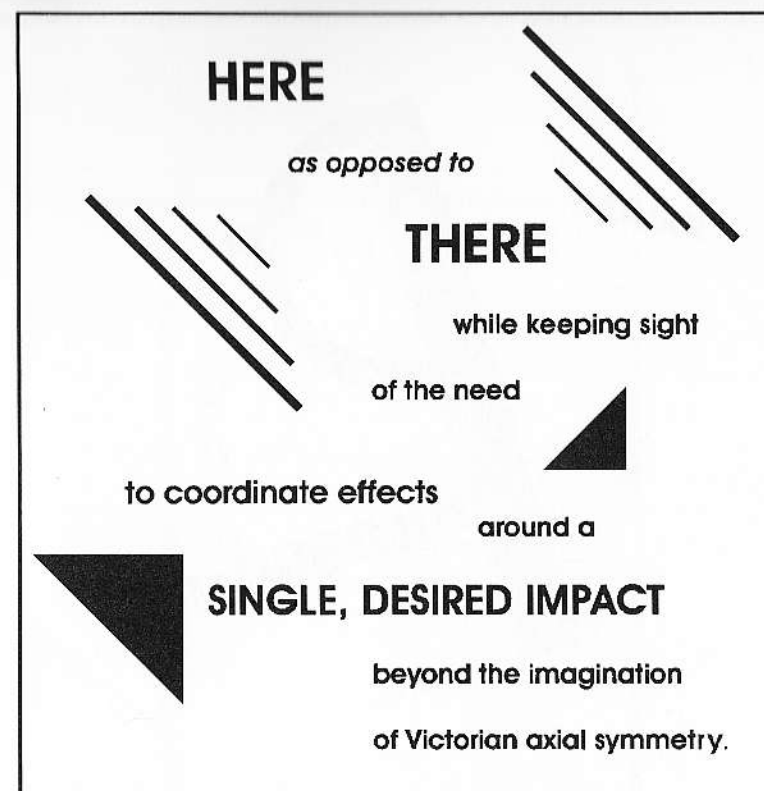


Figure 6.2 Demonstration of modernist typographical design

deliberately marked) columns and rows monitored the overall balance of antithetical elements (see figure 6.6).<sup>6</sup> Like a perfectly poised mobile of disproportionate parts, variation and unity composed a totality of design expressive of the uniquely modern, off-center “unity of life.”<sup>7</sup>

Underlying this new design sense was the crucial modernist principle that both variation and unity had to serve a single function—the communication of meaning. Modernist designers, who differed from literary formalists in accepting the commercial need to pitch a “message,” sometimes saw themselves less as artists of meaning than as technicians of *information*. The great fetish of design in the lineage of Bauhaus and the New Typography was thus “clarity,” which László Moholy-Nagy, Tschichold, and others defined explicitly in informational terms as clean, efficient visual communication for an age drowning in media.<sup>8</sup> Clarity was like the early radio age’s quest for purity of signal. Indeed, we might say that by reducing all graphic elements (even individual sans serif letters) to geometrical shapes that commu-

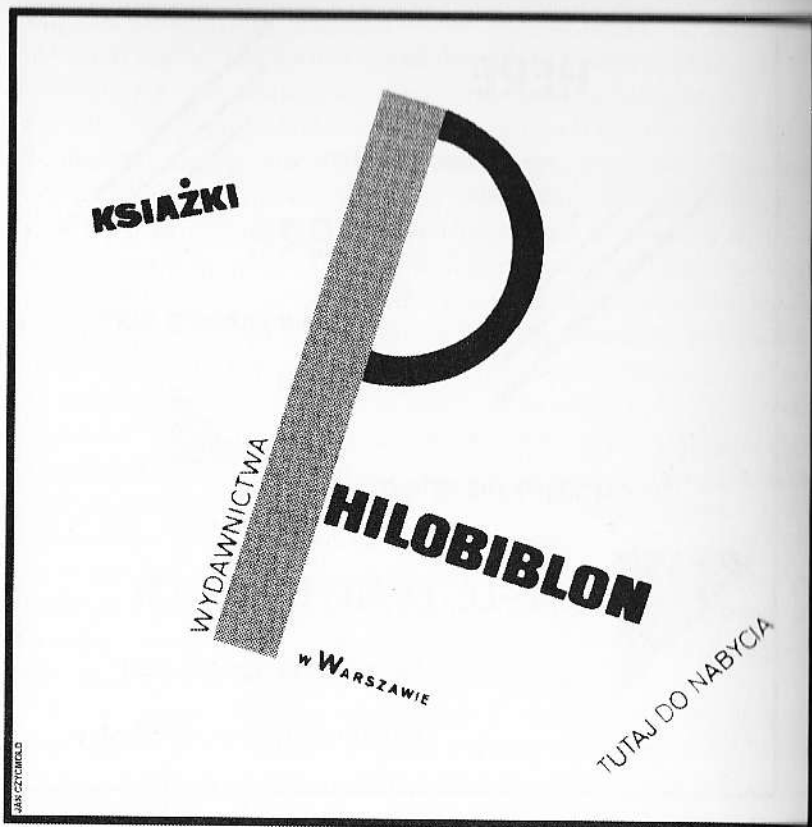


Figure 6.3 Jan Tschichold, display poster for a publisher, 1924

From Philip B. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992), p. 298, fig. 19-24. Text copyright © 1992 by Philip B. Meggs. This material is used by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

nicated compositionally with other shapes at remote locations on the “grid,” modernist design in effect created a visual analogue of telegraphy, radio, and other remote information technologies.<sup>9</sup>

The descent of Bauhaus and New Typography into the International Style that subsequently dominated advertising, the new magazines (e.g., Otto Storch’s makeover of *McCall’s* and Henry Wolf’s redesign of *Esquire* and *Harper’s Bazaar* in the 1950s and 1960s), and the corporate identity business has been surveyed in such works as Philip Meggs’s *History of Graphic Design*.<sup>10</sup> We need do no more here to indicate the general impact of this descent than note that from the 1960s on virtually any mass-circulation book, magazine, advertisement, or package design with mixed text and graphics showed precisely the sense for asymmetrical arrangement that the New Typography had schematized



Figure 6.4 Tschichold's cover for *elementare typographie* insert, 1925

From Philip B. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992), p. 298, fig. 19-25. Text copyright © 1992 by Philip B. Meggs. This material is used by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

as early as 1928 (see figures 6.7 and 6.8). Such was now simply “good design”; it “looked right.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, almost any work *about* design printed from the 1960s through at least the 1980s recites exactly the modernist mantra of asymmetry, overall unity, and informational clarity. In his “Principles of Design” (1980), for instance, Jon Lopez notes the requirement for “tensions”



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## JAN TSCHICHOLD

Lehrer an der Meisterschule für Deutschlands Buchdrucker in München

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Handbuch für die gesamte Fachwelt  
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Diskussion bei allen Beteiligten hervorgerufen. Wir glauben dem Bedürfnis,  
die aufgeworfenen Fragen ausführlich behandelt zu sehen, zu entsprechen,  
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und zu beweisen, daß die neue Typographie ein ebenso notwendiger  
Ausdruck einer neuen Gestaltung ist wie die neue Baukunst und  
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Figure 6.5 Tschichold's publicity leaflet for *Die neue Typographie*, 1928 (original printed in black on yellow)

From Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography: A Handbook for Modern Designers*, trans. Ruari McLean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. xxi. Image copyright by Brinkmann & Bose Publisher.

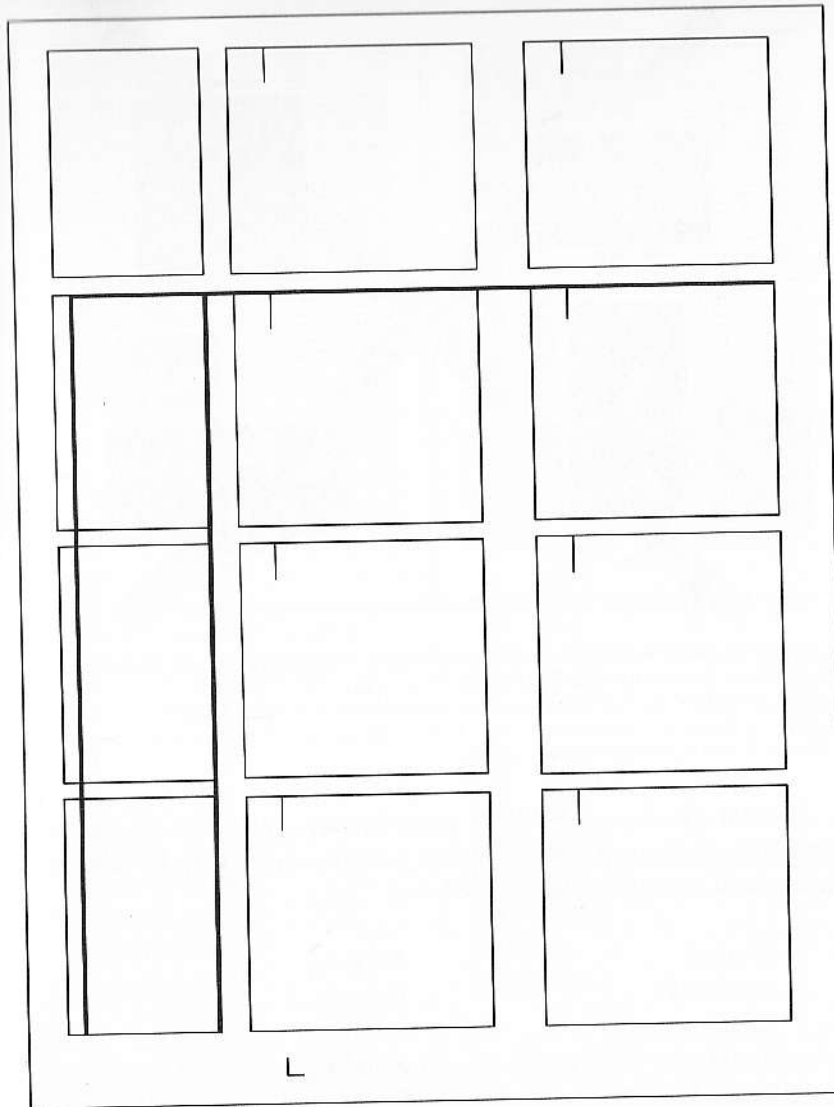


Figure 6.6 "The Grid System"

From Paul Rand, *A Designer's Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 195. Reprinted by permission of the Estate of Paul Rand.

formed "by confrontation of parts with the page and with each other," then emphasizes that "the key to successful design is harmony: All elements must be brought into agreement and must be considered in relation to each other and to the whole. Harmony is derived from coherence in design, from clarity of thought transferred by the designer to his work through a singleness of aim."<sup>12</sup>

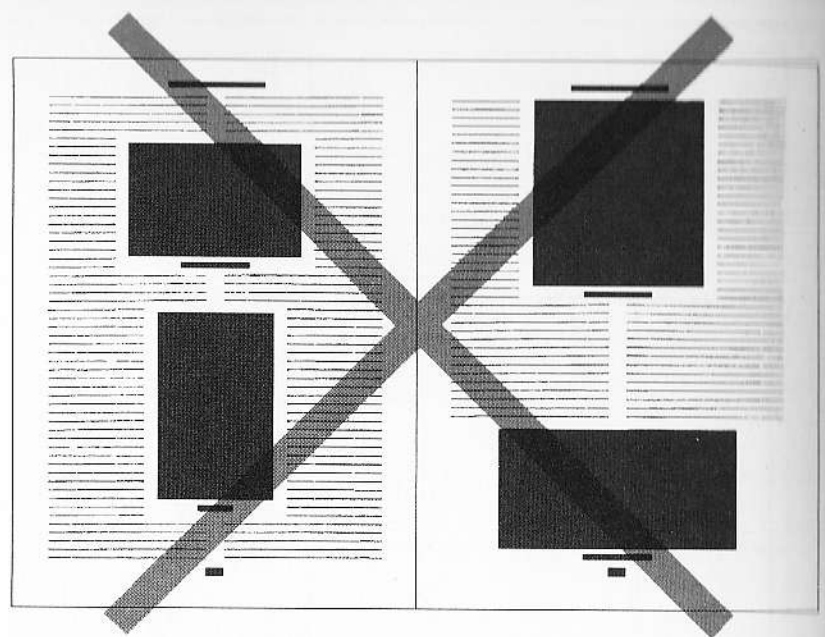


Figure 6.7 Tschichold, "How Blocks Used to Be Arranged in Magazines: Schematic, thoughtless centering of blocks. 'Decorative,' impractical, uneconomic (= ugly)"  
From Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography: A Handbook for Modern Designers*, trans. Ruari McLean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 210. Copyright © 1995 Regents of the University of California, © 1987 Brinkmann & Bose Publisher.

Donis A. Dondis's *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (1973) puts the case with systematic precision. A visually literate design requires both asymmetrical contrast and unified harmony as follows:

**Contrast**

- Instability
- Asymmetry
- Irregularity
- Complexity
- Fragmentation
- Intricacy
- Exaggeration
- Spontaneity
- Activeness
- Boldness
- Accent
- Transparency

**Harmony**

- Balance
- Symmetry
- Regularity
- Simplicity
- Unity
- Economy
- Understatement
- Predictability
- Stasis
- Subtlety
- Neutrality
- Opacity

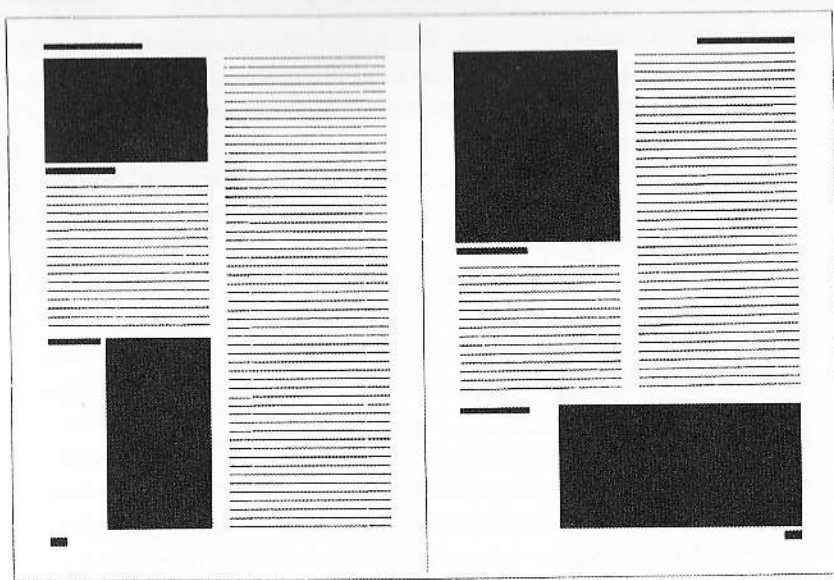


Figure 6.8 Tschichold, "The same blocks, correctly arranged in the same type-area. Constructive, meaningful, and economical (= beautiful)"  
From Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography: A Handbook for Modern Designers*, trans. Ruari McLean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 211. Copyright © 1995 Regents of the University of California, © 1987 Brinkmann & Bose Publisher.

**Variation**

- Distortion
- Depth
- Juxtaposition
- Randomness
- Sharpness
- Episodicity

**Consistency**

- Accuracy
- Flatness
- Singularity
- Sequentiality
- Diffusion
- Repetition<sup>13</sup>



The effect of the resulting gestalt, the very definition of "visual literacy," is clarity: a "clearer comprehension of visual messages" in which "with the speed of light, visual intelligence delivers multiple bits of information."<sup>14</sup>

We should dwell, however, on at least one event in the later twentieth-century reception of modernist design that bears directly on our topic. This event—exemplified in Dondis's phrase, "multiple bits of information"—was the assimilation of clarity not just to information in general but specifically to information technology. The leading players in this process were the technology and media corporations of the 1950s and 1960s whose packaging, advertising, and corporate identity campaigns acquired the flair of Interna-

tional Style under the tutelage of such influential American designers as Paul Rand and Eliot Noyes (and in Europe, Josef Müller-Brockman). At the time, such companies marked the leading edge of corporate design. Though many firms in manufacturing, transportation, and other industries were already following the earlier example of the Container Corporation of America in sponsoring European design, it was above all firms in communications, electronics, and office technology—industries associated with the transmission or reproduction of information—that gave the new principles of design their most visible showcase. These firms included CBS, ABC, Westinghouse, Olivetti (in Europe), and, most influentially, IBM, which had a uniquely strong impact on the design styles of other corporations. Rand and Noyes made International Style pervasive at IBM. Rand, for example, designed the now iconic IBM logo, as well as a host of packaging, poster, trade show exhibit, annual report, and other company materials. Similarly, Müller-Brockman, founder and co-editor of *New Graphic Design*, the definitive journal of the International Style, became design consultant for IBM Europe.<sup>15</sup>

Clarity of design in the modernist style thus molded itself to the new information technology—to the point (especially after the impact of Apple-based computer graphics software) that the discourse of design simply internalized its affiliation with IT.<sup>16</sup> Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast's *Graphic Style: From Victorian to Post-Modern* (1988), for instance, begins by defining design as a target-aware "transmission code." "The graphic designer," they say, "is basically organizing and communicating messages—to establish the nature of a product or idea, to set the appropriate stage on which to present its virtues, and to announce and publicize such information in the most effective way. Within this process, style is a transmission code, a means of signaling that a certain message is intended for a specific audience."<sup>17</sup> In general, as Matthew G. Kirschenbaum has explored in his innovative dissertation, *Lines for a Virtual T/y/o/pography: Electronic Essays on Artifice and Information*, one of the most powerful aesthetic phenomena of recent decades has been the consolidation of graphic design and information display into a common "spectrum of tropes, icons, and graphic conventions that collectively convey the notion of 'information' to the eye of the beholder."<sup>18</sup>

The consolidation became even more pronounced in the flourishing sub-branch of graphic design known as "information design" or "information architecture," which specializes in explanatory, diagrammatic, statistical, cartographic, and other information-dense forms. Graphic design is "rational imagery," Jacques Bertin said in his *Semiology of Graphics* (1967), and added in a preface to the English translation (1983) that such design is the supplement specifically of computerization.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the first sentence of

Edward Tufte's *Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (1983) declares that "excellence in statistical graphics consists of complex ideas communicated with clarity, precision, and efficiency"—an argument that unfolds its proto-cybernetic personality only when we then realize that the book is concerned throughout not with the communication of "complex ideas" but with the communication of *data* (as in Tufte's second sentence, which begins, "Graphical displays should show the data").<sup>20</sup> ["Data," the concept and the word, is the fetish of Tufte's book. There is to be functional visual code and only code, Tufte insists; all else is "non-data-ink" and "chartjunk" to be rigorously expunged.<sup>21</sup> So, too, Peter Bradford and Richard Saul Wurman's *Information Architects* (1997; a showcase for information exhibits that includes Web sites) celebrates the emergence of "information design" as an independent art form. By the time of the Web, in sum, graphics and digital information became part of the same integral design. Both were aspects of the single, great canvas now subsuming all the pages, posters, leaflets, packages, and so on that the modernist designers had created. That canvas is the generalized information "interface."]  

Now at last we are in position to look at cool design on the Web, much of which copies *mutatis mutandis* the "look and feel" of modernist graphic design. In his perceptive "Avant-garde as Software," Lev Manovich has argued generally that contemporary "new media" is deeply instinct with the principles of the original avant-garde: "constructivist design, New Typography, avant-garde cinematography and film editing, photo-montage, etc." of the 1920s era are now "materialized" and "naturalized" in computing interfaces.<sup>22</sup> I will extend Manovich's argument to the case of the World Wide Web in particular by starting with one exceptionally direct, if limited, piece of evidence of the persistence of modernist design.

Opening Paul Rand's essay "Design and the Play Instinct" (which follows "The Good Old 'Neue Typografie'" in his retrospective *A Designer's Art*), we encounter a series of visual paradigms demonstrating how good design blends formal discipline with the "play principle." Meditating on the grid paradigm, for example, Rand uses the page layout of his essay itself to play off asymmetry against the grid's "orderly and harmonious distribution of miscellaneous graphic material."<sup>23</sup> Similar meditations on visual paradigms from both Western and Eastern art follow, and the essay concludes by discussing the *chasen* whisk of Japanese tea ceremonies, which Rand transforms into the Eastern imago of International Style (fig. 6.9):

Some years ago in Kyoto I was fortunate enough to witness a young Japanese craftsman make the *chasen* you see here. The *chasen* is a whisk used



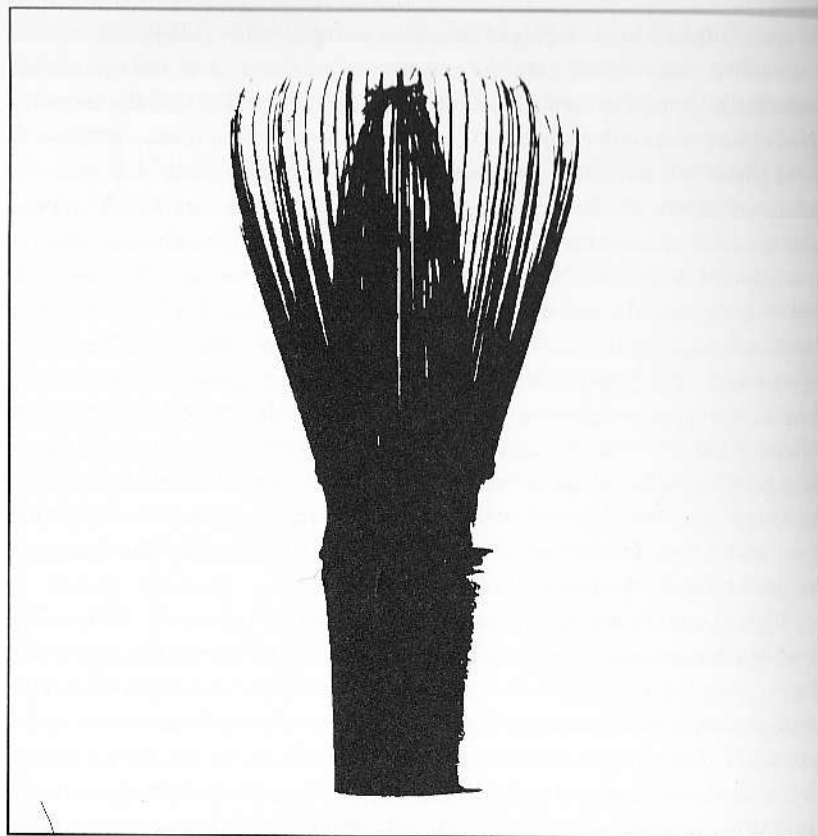


Figure 6.9 Chasen

From Paul Rand, *A Designer's Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 201. Reprinted by permission of the Estate of Paul Rand.

in the tea ceremony and is cut from a single piece of bamboo with a simple tool resembling a penknife. Both the material and manufacturing process (which took about one-half hour) are the quintessence of discipline, simplicity, and restraint. The invention of such an article could not possibly have been achieved by anyone lacking the ability to improvise and the patience to play with a specific material: to see the myriad possibilities and to discover the ideal form.<sup>24</sup>

The *chasen* is as pure in its variation within unity, we may say, as sans serif type.

Now opening Darrell Sano's *Designing Large-Scale Web Sites: A Visual Design Methodology* (1996), we encounter a practicum on Web design steeped

in explicitly modernist principles—to the point, for example, where quotations from well-known earlier designers furnish the chapter epigraphs. (Sano's bibliography also includes ample references to the design tradition. Sano himself was an interface designer at the Netscape company, Silicon Graphics, and Sun Microsystems.) The first epigraph in the book is a passage from Rand's *Designer's Art* emphasizing the totality of design: "Graphic design is essentially about visual relationships—providing meaning to a mass of unrelated needs, ideas, words, and pictures. It is the designer's job to select and fit this material together—and make it interesting."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, we discover in Sano's book several reproductions of an apparently identical *chasen* (presented in the same proportions and same orientation as Rand's). The *chasen* appears on the Web site for a "Japonesque Designs" online store from which Sano draws many of his examples (see figure 6.10).<sup>26</sup> As illustrated on the pages of this site, Sano writes, "the use of asymmetrical page layouts corresponds nicely with the aesthetic of Asian art." Thus is the affiliation of Web design with the asymmetrical modernist tradition at once clinched and—through an orientalism precisely like Rand's—displaced.<sup>27</sup>

What this detail of the *chasen* highlights is the massive influence of modernist design on the now flourishing corps of Web design practitioners and consultants (allied with the interface designers and programmers responsible for the underlying GUI/browser environment). The majority of Web authors do not, unlike Sano, borrow in any deliberate way from Bauhaus, the New Typography, or International Design. The influence runs deeper. Once the decision is made to "design" at all—that is, to add to a page a *sense* of design epitomized by cool—then the entire modernist heritage (mediated through print media, print-influenced desktop publishing conventions, and even print-influenced titling or framing effects in video) flows onto the Web.

Thus we may consider alongside Sano's book such other works about Web design as Crystal Waters's *Web Concept & Design* (1996). Waters includes a section titled "Flexing the Grid: An Example" that in essence recapitulates Rand's argument about play in the grid and includes a sample page from Waters's *Typo News* Web site showing asymmetric composition balanced within a five-column grid structure ("the main body of the text doesn't follow a straight column down the page, but it does use the column guides to keep the balance and proportion of the text consistent").<sup>28</sup> For designers like Waters, no direct citation of modernist principles is necessary; "International" Style now simply is "World Wide" Web style. Again, consider Vincent Flanders's well-known Web site (and later book, coauthored with Michael Willis), *Web Pages That Suck*. Subtitled "Learn Good Design by



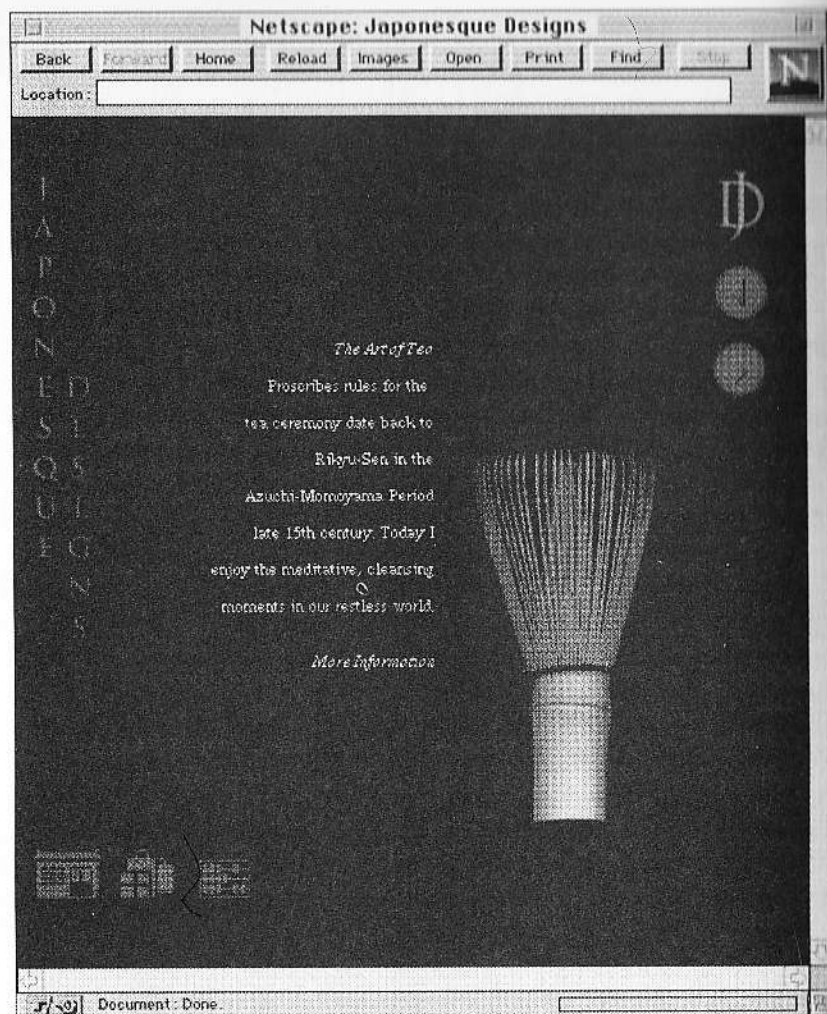


Figure 6.10 "Asymmetrical page layout using tables with no border"

From Darrell Sano, *Designing Large-Scale Web Sites: A Visual Design Methodology* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), p. 191. Copyright © 1996 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. This material is used by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Looking at *Bad Design*,<sup>29</sup> the site and book answer the question "What makes a site cool?" by satirical inversion, exhibiting what amounts to a rogue's gallery of uncool pages and techniques. While Flanders and Willis animadvert on some problems specific to the online medium (wasting bandwidth, for example), their general point is that pages "suck" if they become too busy with background images, Java and Javascript, mixed fonts, drop shad-

ows, and so forth. Pages suck, in short, if they ignore both the sans serif or white space minimalism that the New Typography had identified with clarity (the original conservation of bandwidth) and the careful coordination of asymmetry that the New Typography had called *gestalt*. Exemplary is Flanders and Willis's trenchant critique of designers who are seduced by their graphics programs into promiscuous imagery. Besides the issue of bandwidth, they say, "there's the whole concept of aesthetics. It's hard to fight the urge to make really complex images because, quite frankly, complex images look cool. Once again, it takes talent to make them fit in with the look of a web page."<sup>29</sup> At core, the aesthetics invoked here is modernist. Cool is only cool if "fitted" into a functionally clear, total design.

Actual "cool pages," as opposed to works about cool, provide the QED to my argument. We might look again at Paul Schrank's *Paul's a Computer Geek*, for example. Whether we view the home page of this site or one of its second-tier pages (e.g., the "Design" page exhibiting selected past and present graphic designers), we observe a particularly striking use of such New Typography features as asymmetrical layout and diagonal forms (all accented by an icon labeled "Gestalt" at the bottom of the home page) (figs. 6.11 and 6.12). So, too, perusing Shauna Wright's *Flaunt* site (one of the personal pages that have made the cool anthologies), we find pages whose "left-" and "right-centric" vertical panels resemble the layouts of Tschichold.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the asymmetrically placed vertical panels on such pages—particularly when used to list contents or hold a navigation bar—are just a cooler version of the standard Web "magazine" format mimicking the dominant format of print magazines since the 1960s (which in their turn mimicked such layouts as Tschichold's celebrated leaflet publicizing his *New Typography*). Compare, for example, the *C/Net News.com* page on any day with Tschichold's leaflet (fig. 6.5). Or, to accommodate a variant of contemporary magazine formatting: consider the paradigm of the double-page spread with graphics and text contoured together into a single visual ensemble. We have only to look at *The Rock-n-Roll Gallery Collection of Richard E. Aaron* (a *Cool Site of the Day* selection in August 1998) to see how the Web duplicates Otto Storch's redesign of *McCall's* using New Typographical "typo-photo" composition.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, the variety of cool graphic designs on the Web is so ample that any further conventions I instance here could only exemplify a small part of the overall resemblance to modernist design. It may be best to generalize, then, by descending to the level of the underlying code. As originally conceived, HTML or Hypertext Markup Language (like the SGML or Standard Generalized Markup Language of which it is a much reduced subset)

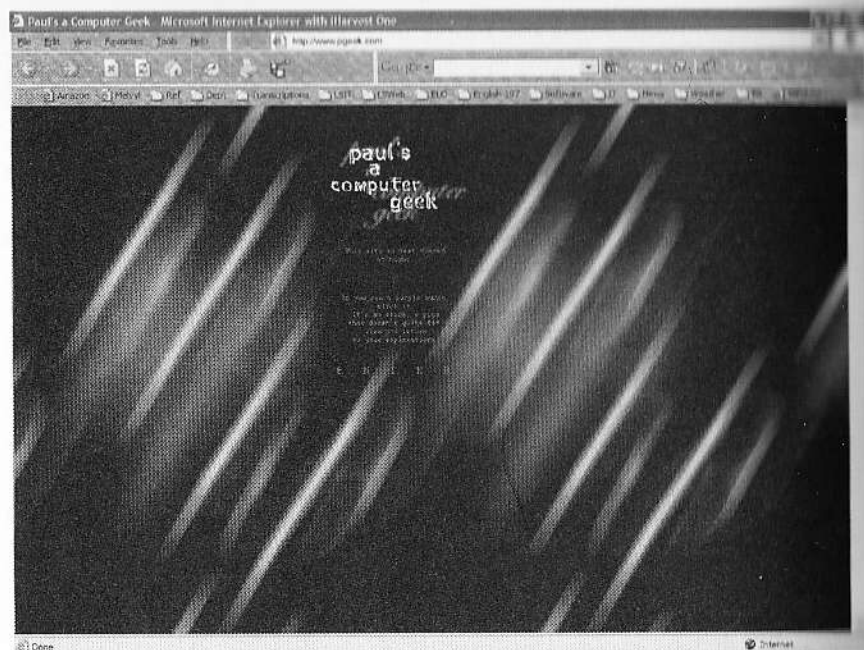


Figure 6.11 Screenshot from Paul Schrank's *Paul's a Computer Geek* Web site, 2000. Retrieved in various versions, 1997–99; last retrieved 3 December 2000. <<http://pgeek.com>> Used with permission of Paul Schrank.

was primarily a *logical* rather than layout-oriented tagging language. HTML, for example, used tags (enclosed in angle brackets) to declare simply,

<H1>This is a level 1 header</H1>

or, again, <EM>This text is emphasized</EM>. It was up to the particular browser program to choose the actual display font, type size, color, and screen position for any tagged content. (A few redundant tags such as <B>boldface</B> instead of <EM>emphasis</EM> addressed display properties more directly, but were supposed to be used infrequently in order to allow the browser the greatest freedom in rendering content suited to the user's hardware and software environment.)

But as HTML evolved into its 2.0, 3.0, 3.2, and 4.01 specifications under the governance of the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium), two complementary developments increasingly gave designers more direct control over the display of their work. First, the major browsers (by this time, Netscape's Navigator and Microsoft's Internet Explorer) shifted at least some of their emphasis from improvising maverick, proprietary tags (e.g., Netscape's infamous <BLINK>) to respecting the official HTML specifications. This al-

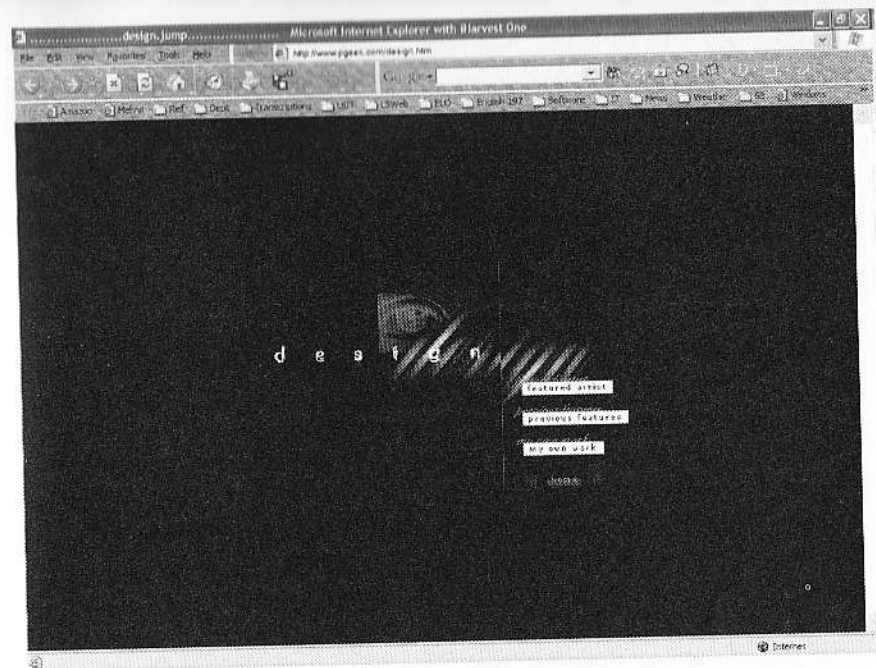


Figure 6.12 Screenshot from *Design* page on Paul Schrank's *Paul's a Computer Geek* Web site, 2000. Retrieved in various versions, 1997–99; last retrieved 3 December 2000. <<http://pgeek.com/design.htm>> Used with permission of Paul Schrank.

lowed designers to sketch on a more stable, standard canvas on which they could predict—or at least control variations within—the actual display of a page (though Netscape and Internet Explorer continued to be incompatible when it came to more advanced HTML features). Second, the reason the browsers were able to converge upon official HTML while still accommodating the need for design that had originally driven their invention of rogue tags was that the official code standard itself—like the late Roman empire incorporating the barbarians—brought more design features into the fold. Designers now gained official ways to exert finer control over basic typography—the choice of fonts, sizes, type colors, and type alignments—and thus to implement bolder, more sophisticated, and often asymmetrical and sans serif typographical arrangements. They gained the ability to “wrap” text to the left and right around images, which provided some limited ways to flow text around photos in a “typo-photo” ensemble approximating the asymmetrical schema we saw in Tschichold (figs. 6.7, 6.8). Later evolutions of HTML, indeed, offered even more flexibility in positioning images relative to each other and to text—for example, through the use of superimposable, floating “layers.” Perhaps most important, designers finally gained control over



"grid" layout. In particular, the previously dominant HTML linear layout device of the "list" (the bulleted or numbered series of items that was the most advanced formatting feature of early Web pages) expanded into two dimensions. With the addition of tags for "tables" in HTML 3.0 (and later, "frames" in HTML 4.01), list design could be exploded into full-blown grid design such that each page or section of a page became a matrix of columns and rows. A vertical navigation menu, for example, could be laid out asymmetrically on the page by including it in a column or frame to the left or, for more intricate effects, within a "nested" table-within-table.

By the time CSS or Cascading Style Sheets arrived in 1997–98 to complement HTML 4.01 (by allowing designers to create a separate style sheet providing much more extensive, granular, and sitewide control over the appearance and positioning of typographical elements), the coding conventions for modernist "total" design were all in place. HTML now allowed designers to work in something like a desktop publishing environment that could make the Web look more like familiar magazines, newspapers, TV/video, and other preexisting media (a fine example of what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call "remediation").<sup>32</sup> If we factor out animation and video (which have their own complex relations of remediation to film, still photography, and print media), then what is left when we survey the coding possibilities added to each successive HTML specification is a collection of tags and attributes (and style sheets) whose primary intent was to import New Typographical layout principles wholesale onto the Web.<sup>33</sup> Through the channel provided by HTML, "good design" could simply flow into contemporary interface design like water flowing down the path of least resistance. The entire tradition of modernism and International Style poured into online cool, "Bauhaus" into "home page."

But to say that cool on the Web thus merely absorbed modernist design once a conduit was laid in the code is to understate the phenomenon drastically. Above all, the Web represents the contemporary knowledge worker's active *thirst* for design—his or her eager, restless, even desperate need for a design sense akin to that honed by modernist forebears. In this regard, the fact that cool knowledge workers are swathed in "designer" labels everywhere in their consumer life—in their clothes, bottled water, gym equipment, coffee grinder, and so on—is the least of it. The other half of the equation is the overwhelming need for design that such workers express in their *producer* life. Until recently, this need was fulfilled by corporate International Style only in highly nonegalitarian ways. Lavish corporate lobbies and well-appointed executive suites were a design Olympus from which issued all the logos, rituals, symbols, and other insignia of corporate culture governing mere mortals, while at ground level, just the subtlest, rounded con-

touring of cubicle furniture, Euro-styled desk lamp, or injection-molded computer casing gave any hint of design. But with the arrival of a new generation of GUI interfaces and, most spectacularly, of the Web, for the first time the prosaic space of the monitor at the dead center of the life of knowledge work became selectable, configurable, *styleable*. With form now an option at the functional heart of knowledge work, a vast, pent-up desire for design and style in the workplace was released. Where previously knowledge workers could satisfy their need for design only in consumption, now they exercised the power of design in production, too, as if completing the circuit of earlier twentieth-century lifestyle (production driving consumption) in a more total experience of "lifedesign" (production and consumption integrated in the activity of design). Today, everyone wants to be a designer: not just graphic artists, architects, or fashion designers, but—in different yet related senses—engineers, programmers, database designers, Web page authors, and even clerical workers using the latest formatting features of GUI word processors to create new memo styles.<sup>34</sup>

Why the need for such a total life-gestalt of design? If the fundamental agenda of the ethos of information is proto-identity or "character," as I have argued, then that of the *aesthetics* of information is collective character—culture. Design is now the primary discipline—far more so than education—through which knowledge workers receive their culture. Whether the culture received is high or popular is not the issue here (design is receptive to both). Rather, the issue is whether the culture received is to be organized according to one or the other of the two following schemas. One is for culture to be disseminated in what is now the dominant postindustrial fashion from the culture of production to that of consumption. In this way any holism that arises—let us simply call it the "good life"—comes only through the infiltration of production values into all facets of consumption (extending workplace culture into leisure at home). [The other schema of the "good life"—which is what Web design helps knowledge workers imagine, if not fully enact—is a reaction against postindustrial life. It is the coequal dissemination of the life of consumption into production—like keeping a sports page open on one's desktop next to a spreadsheet. Design is precisely the discipline that promises to fuse the production and consumption of culture so as to integrate undecidably the lives of work and nonwork. When put on the desktop, as opposed to being kept on a pedestal in the executive suite, design is the last hope—or fantasy—of the knowledge worker for a cultural holism hearkening back to preindustrial times.]

In sum, it is the craving for *form* in information—the need for a Web page to be more like a glossy consumer magazine than cargo off a truck—



that gives the information worker the hope of being truly in-“formed” with character. Only such a craving makes even the most routine documents of work seem to open up with a mere click of the browser into whole vistas of culture beyond the ken of corporate culture. There could be no better role model for such seeming independence from corporate culture (positioned *within* the cubicles of such culture) than the hip designer—with whom anyone who today says, “Cool!” while gazing at a Web page or other high-tech artifact now subconsciously identifies. For who if not the designer in our time exemplifies the *professional who has culture*?

### Cool Is an Antistyle of Information

No sooner do we see the unmistakable imprint of modernist design in cool, however, than we immediately note its antithesis. Cool is also fundamentally antidesign.

It will be useful to start by looking back to antidesign in print graphics. In this context, *antidesign* names a particular movement of the late 1960s, primarily Italian, that played up “distortions of scale and form, the shocking use of colour, [and] visual puns or the undermining of an object’s functional value” to protest the cooptation of “good design” by commercial interests.<sup>35</sup> More generally, the term may serve to label a whole confederation of graphic design movements from the 1970s on—for example, the California New Wave, “deconstructivism,” the Memphis school, New Wave Typography, and Postmodernism.<sup>36</sup> Though varied in their styles, media, tone, and stance toward commercial interests, such movements had in common the need to contravene International Style through such means as deliberately fragmenting a composition; crowding the frame with superimposed or overlapping elements that eschewed “clarity”; blurring, twisting, stretching, distorting, or repeating text elements to near illegibility; deploying diagonals and other atectonic forms “deconstructively” to highlight unresolvable rather than dialectically poised contradictions; and so on. Illustrative of such tendencies is the complex work of April Greiman, who trained at the Basel School of Design in Switzerland but later became prominent in the California New Wave (figs. 6.13, 6.14). Another example is that of Wolfgang Weingart, who taught Greiman in Basel and was a founding figure in the break with Swiss style and in New Wave typography (fig. 6.15).

Many of these antidesigners were assisted in their experimentation by new computer graphics programs that emerged during what Anne Morgan Spalter calls the “second period” of computer graphics from the 1970s to 1980s (the genealogy that extends from MacPaint on the original Macintosh

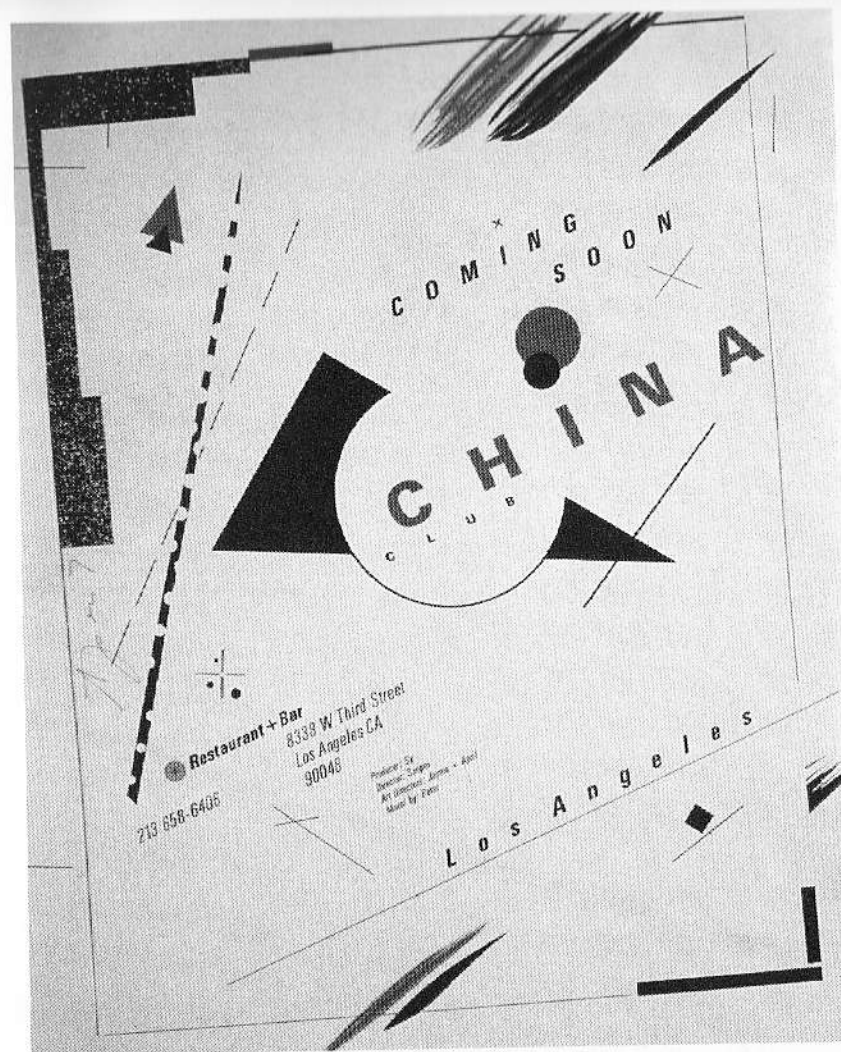


Figure 6.13 April Greiman, China Club advertisement, 1980  
April Greiman Made in Space.

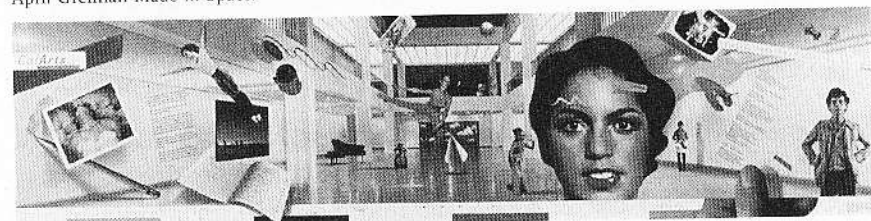


Figure 6.14 April Greiman and Jayme Odgers, California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) poster, 1979  
April Greiman Made in Space.

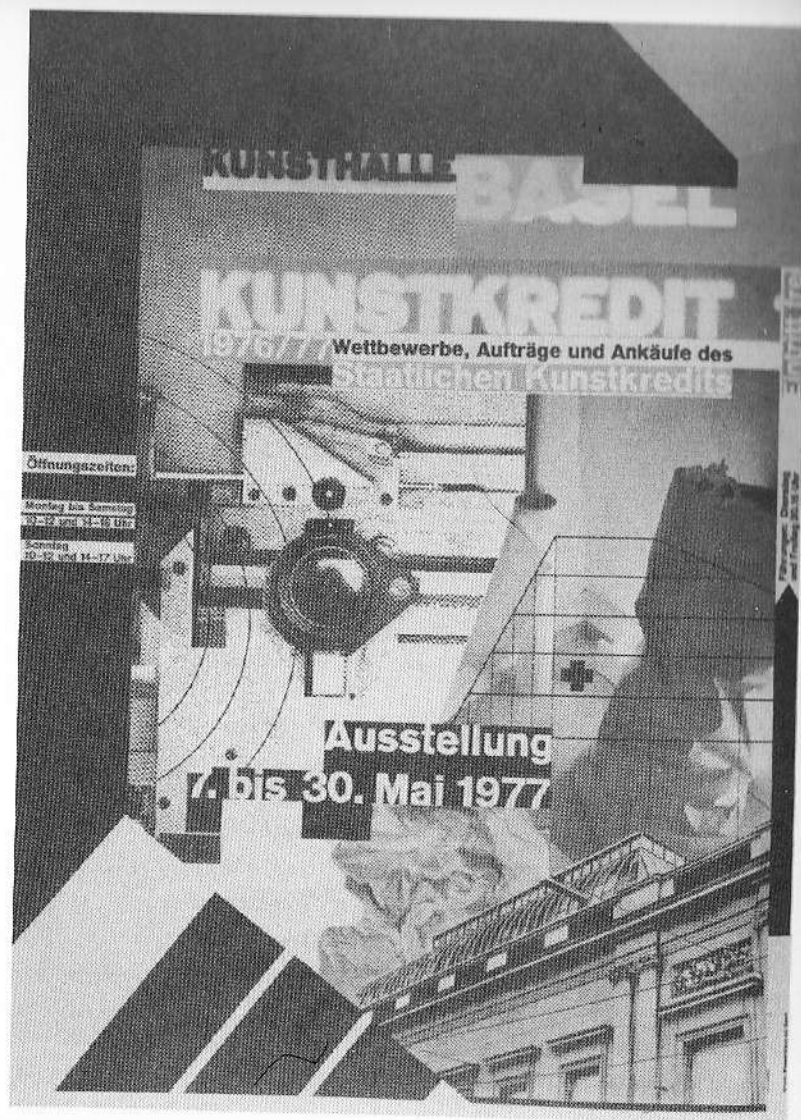


Figure 6.15 Wolfgang Weingart, exhibition poster, 1977  
 From Wolfgang Weingart, *Wege zur Typographie [My Way to Typography]* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller, 2000), p. 468. Reprinted by permission of Wolfgang Weingart and Lars Müller Publishers.

computer to the now industry-standard Adobe Photoshop and its whole sub-industry of third-party “filters” and “plug-ins”).<sup>37</sup> These programs and the computer-focused technologies of vision they drew attention to established what amounted to a new visual vocabulary.<sup>38</sup> In Greiman’s 1986 poster for the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, for example, bitmapped or

raster imagery emerges from the status of tool to become the dominant design element (fig. 6.16). Obvious “jaggies” in the typeface emphasize an iconography of pixelation that repeats in pixelated textures throughout the work as well as in the basic compositional concept of jumbled, superimposed layers (an updating of the avant-garde modernist collage principle in which each layer, like a pixel, is an independent image-element to be switched on or off autonomously). The prominent role of the computer in such work allows us to recognize that the negative impulse in antidesign to repudiate International Style—to deface the pattern of asymmetry, unity, and clarity—was also a positive impulse to open design to new digital media, forms, and tools that challenged, rather than simply extended, “good design.” Just as experimental typography had started the twentieth century by registering the collision between print and such new media as photography and film, so it finished the century by registering the collision between print and digitization. The typo-photo principle of composition that by mid-century had restabilized type relative to photography now faced the challenge of pixelation, which changed the rules of the game by reconstituting the nature of both type and photography.<sup>39</sup> Dissolving the two into a common digital dust of vision, it created the conditions for an integration so thorough—or at least so altered—that it ironically undermined the modernist ideal of integration based on clearly differentiated *unlike* elements.<sup>40</sup>

Phrased eschatologically, the crisis triggered in print design by digitization marks what Matthew G. Kirschenbaum calls “the other end of print,” by which he means not just the digitization of print (“the ‘end of print’ is . . . a phrase routinely invoked in the context of electronic media”) but specifically “radical demonstrations of the communicative limits of the textual condition” conducted in graphic design. Speaking of the paradigm-setting antidesign of David Carson in the music magazine *Ray Gun*, Kirschenbaum observes,

This *post-alphabetic* aesthetic is one that appears precisely at the point of print media’s imperative to formalize a representation of its own putative demise. That is, it is an aesthetic that is intensely self-reflexive in its attempt to depict, and at some level iconify, the material conditions of print’s communicative exhaustion. The body of graphic design work associated with Carson, *Ray Gun*, *Emigre*, Cranbrook and CalArts therefore bears close scrutiny by students of the new media, for it dramatizes that aspect of the relationship between print and electronic textualities driven by the need of the former to assimilate and contain the ruptures of the latter.<sup>41</sup>





Figure 6.16 April Greiman, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) poster, 1986  
April Greiman Made in Space.

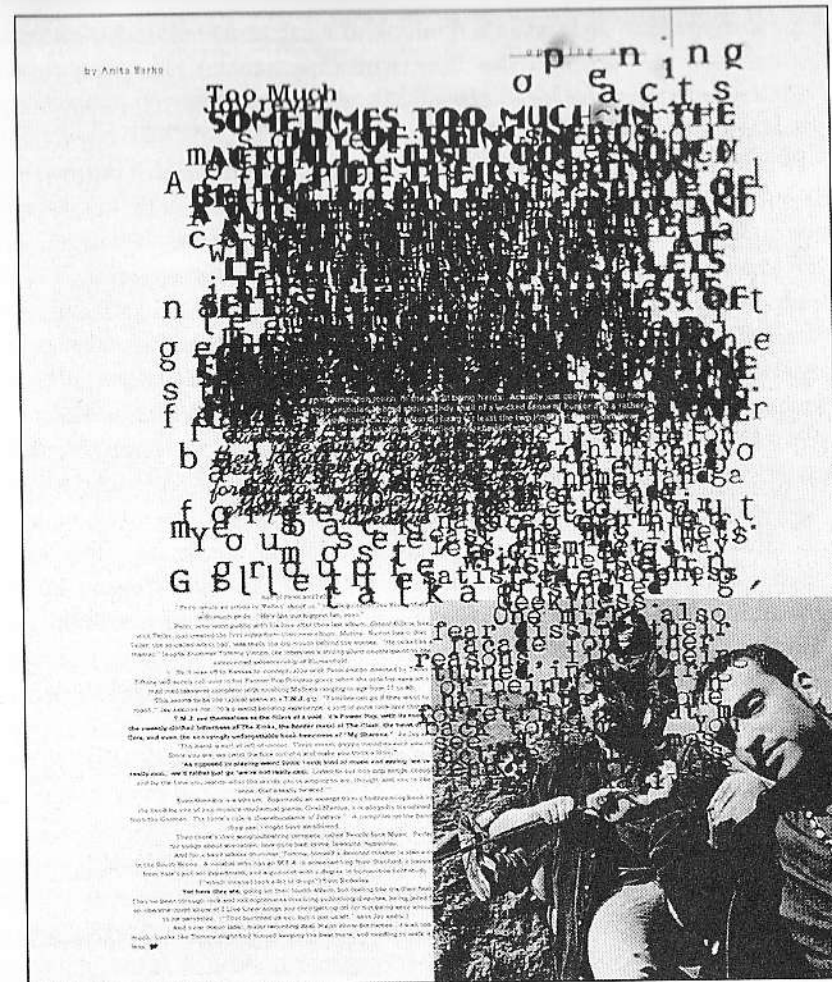


Figure 6.17 David Carson, "Too Much Joy"  
From Ray Gun, 1992. Reproduced in Lewis Blackwell and David Carson, *The End of Print: The Graphic Design of David Carson* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995). Design © 1995 by David Carson.

Or, put another way, whether print *can* "assimilate and contain the ruptures" imposed by digital media is the open question posed by compositions of antidesign as ferocious as those collected in Carson's retrospective portfolios of his work (the first of which was Blackwell and Carson's *End of Print* [1995]; see figure 6.17). After all, if we look at *Wired Magazine*—which by the late 1990s had become the advertisement of the technical, thematic, and commercial impact of computerization on graphics—we see a Carson-like "illegible" ideal of typography that indeed seems to take the International Style



to its antipodes.<sup>42</sup> At least as laid out on the magazine's most self-conscious showcase pages during its earlier, more experimental years, very little of such typography is balanced or unified in the modernist style. Rather, asymmetry knows no bounds. Colored text floats over or under garishly clashing backgrounds, type moves every which way and even tunnels in narrow, horizontal corridors from one double page spread to the next, autonomous graphic elements jostle each other in cut-and-paste patterns wholly unaware of any grid, lines and box frames seem to exist less to steer reading than to allude to some ineffable, abstract principle of circuitry, and so on. Correlatively, very little in such typography is "clear." The only thing that comes clear is the fundamental *unclear* of the "vision" of information in an age when that vision is caught in the contradiction between synoptic overview and fragmentary views. The underlying message of antidesign, in other words, is that good design cannot be equated with informational clarity because information itself is profoundly unclear.<sup>43</sup>

If we now turn from print media to the Web, we discover a mode of antidesign that is often less acutely self-conscious but more existential. This is because antidesign is part of the medium's condition of possibility (and not just, to use Kirschenbaum's term, of its demise). The Web is a creature of networked, distributed information, and that fact alone shakes the notion of gestalt to its foundation. The networked nature of its medium imposes on the Web the following two antifoundational axioms of design: first, content is not form; second, form (unmoored from the fiction of governing content) is never stable, simultaneous, or total.

The first axiom follows from the logical structure of HTML as it evolved to suit the physical parameters of networked, client-server communication. Those parameters decree that designers who mount pages on a server cannot know except in broad terms what display format lies at the other end of the wire on the client machine. Monitors differ in physical screen size, display resolution, color depth and temperature, and sometimes also aspect ratio, and even if all monitors and their supporting graphics cards and software drivers were the same, different operating systems, browsers, and individual browser configurations on the remote client machine would affect the dimensions of the display window, the type font and size, the presence or absence of images, and other features. As we have seen, HTML is a markup language whose original, intended function—though less puritan in this regard than its parent SGML—was to describe rather than form content. Even with all the new tags for absolute positioning, sizing, coloring, and so on that we have reviewed, HTML authors must in the last instance acknowledge that the responsibility for forming or "rendering" content belongs to

the particular browser and machine at the other end of the connection (as is clear to any Web designer who has ever spent hours trying unsuccessfully to trick a particular browser into displaying something against its grain).<sup>44</sup> Effectively, the Web manages content and form as if on two separate tracks; all the tricks of later HTML are merely incomplete workarounds for this fundamental bifurcation in the design firmament.

The ramifications of this bifurcation are myriad—so much so that the split between content and form must be considered the very engine of formal innovation on the Web (just as the principle of the unity of form and function drove modernist innovations). The fecundity of these ramifications may be suggested by imagining the following, hypothetical "manual" of standard formal problems in HTML and their most common improvised solutions (plus, to take the logic one step further, the problems *caused* by such hacks). Just three initial sections of such a manual (out of many more that could be added) will be representative:

*Design Problem:* To the horror of designers accustomed to print media, Web pages are not really "pages" at all because they open outward indeterminately on both the right and bottom depending on the size of the user's browser window. Even more strangely, the lack of determinate boundaries is not just extensive (extending to the right and bottom) but what might be called intensive as well. Interior distances between text or graphic elements on a Web page stretch and contract with a kind of plasticity unknown to physical design surfaces. Such dynamism in both external and internal space makes it impossible to define the proportions of a Web composition in the manner of a print-based "grid" with precisely calibrated columns and rows.

*Hack:* Lock all content into a fixed-width "table" structure set at a width of approximately 760 pixels (to accommodate smaller monitors running at a horizontal screen resolution of 800 pixels).<sup>45</sup> Alternatively, put the entire design or the most definitive portion of the design (e.g., the logo) in a single, large image that remains the same size no matter how far the browser window extends to the right or bottom.

*Secondary Design Problem:* Fixed-width, 760-pixel tables and graphics appear on wider monitors to be either unintentionally asymmetrical or too severely symmetrical. That is, when tables or graphics are locked to the left, the screen stretches out on large monitors asymmetrically to the right; when such material is aligned down the screen center, left and right margins sprawl outward on either side like the wings of a butterfly pinned for dissection.

*Design Problem:* The lack of any bottom to a Web page makes it difficult to compose on the vertical axis, since the user may have to scroll down a variable number of lines (depending on the display) to see the whole view.

*Hack:* Either ignore the vertical axis when designing a page or attempt to size content to fit approximately on a single screen (especially in the case of such crucial design elements as introductory “splash pages,” top-level home pages, or vertical navigation bars).

*Secondary Design Problem:* The latter, one-size-fits-all solution not only breaks up content into screen-size chunks that exaggerate the “jump and go” rhythm of hypertext (often in contravention of logical rhythm) but also leaves almost no room for interesting design in the vertical space allowed for on smaller monitors (e.g., 600 pixels minus 80 pixels or more for a browser’s menu bars). Every page, in essence, would be something like a “banner”—those narrow advertisements whose constricted vertical dimension testifies to the preciousness of vertical space on Web pages.

*Design Problem:* The internal arrangements of tightly composed table, frame, or other gridlike design structures on a Web page become scrambled when the user’s browser is configured with a type size that is too large. The text in a narrow, vertical navigation menu, for example, might disappear at the right, spill over onto an unintended second line, or cross over into another cell in the visual grid.

*Hack:* Hard-coding fonts and type sizes into a Web page helps, but users can still configure their browser to override such specifications in favor of a default font and type size. Therefore, the only guaranteed solutions are the heavy-handed ones of defining fixed font sizes through a cascading style sheet affiliated with the Web page (a tactic more resistant to variations in browser configuration) or putting the text in question into graphic images that the browser must render intact at the specified size or not at all.

*Secondary Design Problems:* Pages that govern font size through cascading style sheets make it difficult for users with visual impairments or with large monitors set to high screen resolutions to vary the text size to improve basic legibility. A page that puts ordinary text in graphics incurs an overhead of increased download time, difficulty of revision, unsearchability (searching on the Net is primarily text-based), and lost audience (including not just the impatient or technologically obsolete but also users with physical handicaps requiring the assistance of text-to-voice interfaces). In general, the more the designer gimmicks a page, uses advanced HTML, or deploys excessive graphics, the smaller the number of users who can predictably ac-

cess the page with disparate hardware, connection routes, operating systems, browsers, and browser versions.

This abbreviated manual of HTML design problems indicates how pervasively, deeply, and corrosively the lack of fixed spatial dimensions defaces the concept of design on the Web. Indeed, we may take it as a rule that the finer the Web design (e.g., designs exhibiting intricate tables, framesets, or layers), the more the designer has had to fight the conditions of the medium—until the designer is no longer drawing on a screen, but on something “just like” a fixed newspaper or magazine page, except, of course, much thicker, heavier, and more fragile.

The second antifoundational axiom of Web design—that form on the Web is never stable, simultaneous, or total—can now be seen to be simply another way of saying that when form is separated from content it becomes dynamic. While my observations have so far concerned the dynamism of spatial form, the addition here of the notion of “simultaneity” highlights the fact that dynamism on the Web is also profoundly temporal. The reason is that the online environment is indeterminate not just due to varying hardware and software but also because of the unpredictable geographical distances involved. The extensive and intensive stretch of space on a Web page, indeed, may be conceived as a representation of the underlying stretches in the social geography of the Internet, where “near” and “far” have no easy physical analogues but nevertheless do matter. Depending on how far away a client machine is and at what time of day it is trying to connect to a server, the number of intervening servers, gateways, and routers (“hops”), as well as the amount of competing message traffic, can vary widely. The result is a temporal disturbance as powerful as any of the spatial deformations surveyed above. This disturbance contributes to the standard complaint that Web pages take “too long” to download—a perception that is only partly about duration (and often independent of the speed of one’s connection to the Internet). The other component in this perception is the *unpredictability* of the speed, pace, and rhythm of the Web. Online temporality, in other words, amounts to antidesign. My meaning can best be demonstrated by a Web site I constructed in 1995 to make visible the design potential, but also the fundamental irrationality, of Web temporality: the *Lyotard Auto-Differend Page*. Constructed on the basis of one of the few HTML means available at the time to manipulate Web content dynamically and temporally (“client pull”), the site consists of a number of text “tracks” composed of quotations from Lyotard’s works. Viewing the first quotation in a track automatically pulls in the next page of quotations after a prescribed interval. The interval

is timed roughly to match the amount of content or to indicate a theme (e.g., the warning on the "Terror" track says, "you have 20 seconds to read this page . . . 15 . . . 10 . . .," and so on). Yet as I noted in the "Philosophy of This Page" essay on the site, the ability to design such temporality on the Web is extremely limited—so much so that ultimately it is as if the designer cedes the act of design to the geographical and social collectivity that is the Internet itself. The only design, in other words, is the pure contingency or historicity of social time:

Unlike server-push, client-pull works by breaking and opening the connection between client computer and remote server for each successive page. This means that there is a randomness or aleatory quality built into the timing of client-pull universes that bespeaks the intervention of the Internet itself. All Internet transmissions, of course, are aleatory in their timing and route; but client-pull makes this fact more than normally visible. Client-pull makes it possible to reflect on the fact that each of our communications is paced by simultaneous demands made on the network by other communications—by the time-sensitive collectivity that constitutes historicity. Beyond the individually totalizing conventions of *my* communication or *your* communication, in other words, lies a surprise that emerges from the inventiveness of the interaction of *our* communications.<sup>46</sup>

Even in the best of circumstances, therefore (e.g., if one has a broadband connection), the temporality of presentation on Web pages is uncoordinated, illogical, and unpredictable. Text and images download at different paces; the layout of a page on the screen is variously immediate or deferred depending on the nature of included table structures and whether images are coded with explicit size descriptions; and even revisiting the same page produces a different temporal experience based on whether the page was previously cached on the user's hard drive or service provider's specialized caching equipment. This is not even to mention the extension of the Web into animated, video, audio, and database-driven presentations. Such advanced dynamic features have led to the use of a proliferating set of supplementary plug-in programs (e.g., Flash), scripting languages (e.g., Javascript, Active Server Pages), "middleware" programs written in such languages to mediate between databases and the Web, or other event-controlling languages and protocols that create a busy, composite environment of dynamic Web page effects. Yet what is striking about all such features on the Web is that the finer the degree of temporal design they permit, the grosser the mistimings they showcase when undesigned events on the Internet or on the local ma-

chine intervene—for example, the Java applet that takes seven seconds to start because the code interpreter must be initiated, the Javascript-coded movement or transformation of images on a page that works only after all the images are downloaded, the "real time," "streaming" video or audio that skips unpredictably, and so on. At no point up to and including the present broadband age has the temporal experience of opening a Web page matched the crispness and simultaneity of opening a page in a book or magazine—leading to the contradiction that while information may be delivered faster over the Internet, design as such is delivered faster in a physical book.<sup>47</sup> Even when, or if, the fabled era of unlimited bandwidth is reached, it may be predicted that the kind of simultaneity staged by online media will still differ experientially from that of print media. Just as radio or TV differed from print in temporal feel (immediate, simultaneous, but until recently not usable at a time of the user's choice), and just as print itself differed in similar ways from pre-electronic oral media (print, for example, is not simultaneous in creation and reception), so "real time" online media may not converge on a single, universal intuition of time but instead on multifarious new experiences of time (sensitized, for example, to the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication).<sup>48</sup>

What is a cool Web page as a matter of design, then? The answer is now clear, though also paradoxical in a way that shatters the glass of any transparent notion of clarity. On the one hand, cool pages are those that recognize the spatiotemporal disturbances of the medium but then accommodate those disturbances through clever visual metaphors or coding techniques that create the façade of a whole harmonium. Thus, for example, a cool page understands how difficult it is to control external and internal white space and so elects to turn "liquid" rather than lock content into fixed-width designs. A liquid page, in the vocabulary of Project Cool, is one that appears equally attractive on narrow and wide screens, contracting or expanding with such easy grace that we are fooled by a digital version of *trompe l'oeil* into thinking that the source code and the visual rendering (content and form) naturally converge in a unitary page.<sup>49</sup> Just as the brush in the hand of a master calligrapher seems to flow at once unpredictably and with inimitable precision, choosing from infinite possibilities the one perfect, instantaneous apprehension of form, so in the hand of a master designer HTML is a tool to be brushed as much against as with the grain to create unaccountable "elegance" (one of Project Cool's favorite descriptive epithets). Indeed, it is no accident that in describing cool design on the Web we should here reach for a metaphor from an older medium. Cool design on the Web is commonly attended by a wit that delights in covering up the



gap between ambitious design schemes and limited design control by framing the whole composition within an arbitrary visual metaphor drawn from older media—for example, a Web page presented as a notebook complete with spiral binding, a TV with channel controls, a jukebox with selections that light as the cursor clicks on the buttons, and so on. Such metaphors naturalize the limitations of the new medium by disguising them within those of older media (a jukebox console, for example, explains why there should be a fixed-width menu of selections).<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, the pure whimsy of such visual metaphors intended to “explain” accidental formal solutions on the Web may far exceed any impression they leave of control and legitimacy. The ultimate impression the Web leaves, in other words, may well be that there is no good design that is not also inescapably just a mixed metaphor. The *really* cool pages are thus those that understand the disturbances inherent in the medium so well that they do not attempt to accommodate them within a fiction of elegant harmony but instead make disturbance their medium. Really cool pages *play up* antidesign in an irresolvable contest of visual metaphors exposing the constitutive contest of metaphors that *is* the interface.<sup>51</sup> Rather than being seamless examples of *trompe l’œil*, they are seam-full collages designed to expose the innate craftiness—the subterfuge and imposture—of Web craft. Consider again, therefore, all those early Webcam pages whose cool consisted in populating computer screens with fish or lizards—a feat of technical skill whose pleasing quality derived only apparently from achieving the illusion of an aquarium or terrarium. From another point of view, the pleasure of such pages stemmed precisely from the witty, unresolvable *frisson* they created in the clash between computers and livable habitats, machines and nature. The aquarium or terrarium, perhaps, was the looking glass of the cubicle. The caged knowledge worker sitting immobile in front of a glass screen was the real iguana trapped in an unnatural, vitreous world in which people were taken out of their cultures and dropped into a corporate culture where everything is mixed metaphor (e.g., “outplacement,” “golden parachute”). Similarly, consider all the early cool Web pages whose backgrounds eschewed the white space look of modernist design (e.g., all white or all black backgrounds) in favor of “textures” representing something a computer absolutely cannot be: wood, stone, water, fire, gold, fur, scales, and so forth. The ideal nomenclature for computing equipment, perhaps, should not be the hybrid Latin fantasies that have been all the commercial vogue in trademarks (e.g., Intel’s Pentium and Celeron, Dell’s Inspiron, Compaq’s Presario) but instead the original fantasies of classical hybridity: Gryphon, Chimera, Centaur, Minotaur, and so forth. As thematized in one of the para-

digmatic works of hypertext fiction in the 1990s, Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*, the new digital medium bares, rather than hides, its existential seamfulness. Or, to take one more example, consider again the Web site titled *What Is Miles Watching on TV!* What came clear when one tuned into this site was that its images of whatever Miles happened to be watching on TV were really nothing at all like watching TV. Nor was it even like watching Miles in the act of watching TV, since Miles was nowhere to be seen. If this page was cool, as the cool anthologies declared, it must have been because it was one of the Web’s many equivalents of Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*.

Such failed *trompe l’œil* reveals that it is about the very GUI interface that we must at last say, “This is not a pipe.” I take a page here from Neal Stephenson, who after publishing his Pynchonesque novel *Cryptonomicon* exploring the parallel histories of computing and code breaking since World War II, put online (and later published in print) a short monograph titled “In the Beginning . . . Was the Command Line” (included on the Web site promoting the novel). Commenting about the original commercial GUI, Stephenson writes:

The overarching concept of the MacOS was the “desktop metaphor,” and it subsumed any number of lesser (and frequently conflicting, or at least mixed) metaphors. Under a GUI, a file (frequently called “document”) is metaphrased as a window on the screen (which is called a “desktop”). The window is almost always too small to contain the document and so you “move around,” or, more pretentiously, “navigate” in the document by “clicking and dragging” the “thumb” on the “scroll bar.” When you “type” (using a keyboard) or “draw” (using a “mouse”) into the “window” or use pull-down “menus” and “dialog boxes” to manipulate its contents, the results of your labors get stored (at least in theory) in a “file,” and later you can pull the same information back up into another “window.” When you don’t want it anymore, you “drag” it into the “trash.”

There is massively promiscuous metaphor-mixing going on here, and I could deconstruct it till the cows come home, but I won’t. . . . So GUIs use metaphors to make computing easier, but they are bad metaphors. Learning to use them is essentially a word game, a process of learning new definitions of words such as “window” and “document” and “save” that are different from, and in many cases almost diametrically opposed to, the old.<sup>52</sup>

“Click” on the “link” on this “page,” an ordinary Web page might thus say, unconscious that pages do not click in either the aural or tactile senses and that links in any case would produce a sound more like “clink.” But cool

pages know this. Like Web pages that suck (though differentiated from them by some unknown quotient), really cool pages play upon a scrambled code of metaphors that is no sooner decrypted from one medium or form into a remediated analogy than it is immediately (or rather, as Bolter and Grusin put it, hypermediately) reencrypted into further remediated analogies. The design of the GUI interface, in short, is that uncanny doppelgänger of modernist clarity, a cipher. Quick, answer me this riddle: what kind of “desktop” has a “window” that contains “pages” allowing us to “scroll” through “portals” into ever more windows, pages, scrolls, and portals? The Enigma machine that Alan Turing and others battled during World War II, perhaps, is still with us. Only now the cryptological enigma is that *anti*-universal Turing machine called the World Wide Web. Designer: “here is my intricately crafted page.” User: “it came out scrambled on my screen and I keep getting Javascript error messages.”

Thus in the altercation between designer and user the deep design—which is to say, antidesign—of the Web at last shows itself. Both the spatial and temporal conditions of the Web scramble design, and the result is to destabilize the underlying *social meaning* of design. The more the Web designer attempts to freeze the composition on the screen as if it were a display affixed to a spatial whole that can be delivered temporally to the user all at once, the more that designer resists an even deeper design imperative in the medium—the need to make design as fluid as possible so that it can pour across the wires into the unpredictable receptacles, rhythms, and ultimately lives of others. The deep design of the Web is the *distribution* of the authority of design from the content-designer to the user-designer (collaborating with legions of hidden programmer-designers) who configures the local machine and browser. This is why it is not possible, when discussing the Web, to be wholly unambiguous about which perspective—the Web author’s or user’s—we are assuming. Not only is an ever larger number of users becoming literal Web authors and designers (as ordinary word processing, desktop publishing, database, and other office products evolve Web publishing capabilities), but the very concept of using the Web implies a degree of designing the Web. Whether or not the overall quantity of design remains constant (an issue that it would be interesting to measure empirically), the proportion that official designers control—by contrast with the glory days of the great modernist designers—waned.

## Chapter 7

### The Feeling of Information

#### Cool Is a Feeling for Information

As may now be apparent, the ethos of information cool I discussed in chapter 5 is intimately related to the style of such cool I studied in chapter 6. To gaze upon the character of the informed is also to encounter the character of the designer. The move I now make similarly marks not so much a clean transition as a continuation along a single curve of inquiry. Given the paradoxical ethos and style of cool, we may ask, what is the *feeling* of that paradox? How does online cool complete the genealogy of industrial and postindustrial feeling that we have followed? How does the “Fordized face” of the automating era, already having morphed into “service with a smile” in the informing era, now morph yet again in the age of networking? The answer, as we will see, extends the issue of style. Cool style at the beginning of the twenty-first century completes the severe revision the twentieth century had already initiated in old traditions of affiliation between artistic styles and modalities of feeling.

The heart of the problem lies in determining whether the cool “feeling of paradox” is in fact a structure of feeling at all rather than, equally intuitive, a *lack* of feeling. On the one hand, information cool is robust with feeling. Cool, as we remember Netscape’s “What’s Cool?” page saying in its best circus barker’s voice, will “catch our eye, make us laugh, help us work, quench our thirst.” Cool on the Web is a heady brio, gusto, rush, thrill, *feeling* of information. Rather than being the dull, dim anomie that David Shenk calls “data smog”